

Joshua

And
The Land of Promise

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

EBAL AND GERIZIM

(Joshua 8:30)

“Therefore, child of mortality, love thou the merciful Father!
Wish what the Holy One wishes! and not from fear but affection:
Fear is the virtue of slaves; but the heart that loveth is willing;
Perfect was before God, and perfect is Love and Love only!”
- Longfellow

THIS was one of the most impressive scenes that occurred during the occupation of Canaan. Jericho and Ai were heaps of blackened ruins; their kings and people utterly destroyed; their dependent villages mute with terror. And all through the land the rumor ran of the might of Israel's God. And beyond the horizon of the visible, into those realms of evil spirits, which had too long filled the chosen land with horrid rite and obscene orgy, must tidings have come that struck the knell of their supremacy. There must have been panic there, in those dark realms, like that which Milton, in his sublime “*Ode to the Nativity*,” ascribes to the hour of the birth of Christ.

The nations of Canaan appear to have been so panic-stricken that they offered no resistance, and made no attempt at molestation, as all Israel went on a pilgrimage of thirty miles to perform a religious duty, which had been distinctly, and more than once, commanded by the great Lawgiver, whose words constituted their supreme directory.

“**It shall be,**” so the Word stood, “**on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaister them with plaister, and thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law**” (Deuteronomy 11:26-32; 27:2).

Joshua lost no time in obeying these minute and urgent injunctions; and within two or three days after the fall of Ai perhaps within three weeks of the passage of the Jordan the people were assembled in the valley of Shechem, which lies from east to west, sentineled on the north by the sterile slopes of Ebal, rearing itself gaunt and barren against the intense blue of the Eastern sky;

and on the south by its twin-giant Gerizim, “a majestic mass of limestone, with stately head and precipitous sides, but fruitful and picturesque, girt with foliage and beauty.”

The valley between these two is one of the most beautiful in Palestine. Jacob’s well lies at its mouth; and all its luxuriant extent is covered with the verdant beauty of gardens, and orchards, and olive-groves, rolling in waves of billowy beauty up to the walls of Shechem; whilst the murmur of brooks flowing in all directions fills the air. The width of the valley is about a third of a mile; though the summits of the two mountains, in the lap of which it lies, are two miles apart.

It is remarkable that where the two mountains face each other and touch most closely, with a green valley of five hundred yards between, each is hollowed out, and the limestone stratum is broken into a succession of ledges, “so as to present the appearance of a series of regular benches.”

Thus a natural amphitheatre is formed, capable of containing a vast audience of people; and the acoustic properties are so perfect in that dry and rainless air, that Tristram speaks of two of his party taking up positions on the opposite mountains, reciting the Ten Commandments antiphonally, and hearing each other perfectly.

Thither Joshua led the people, that, by a solemn act, they might take possession of the land for God.

I. THE ALTAR ON EBAL

Ebal was stern and barren in its aspect. There was a congruity, therefore, between its appearance and the part it played in the solemn proceedings of the day. For far up its slopes gathered the dense masses of the six tribes, who, with thunderous Amens twelve times repeated, answered the voices of the band of white-robed Levites, as, standing with Joshua and the elders and officers and judges in the green valley, they solemnly repeated the curses of the law.

But that was not the first proceeding in the holy ceremonial. Before the people took up their assigned places on the mountain sides, an altar was reared on the lower slopes of Ebal. Special directions as to its construction had been given in Deuteronomy 27. It was to be built of unhewn stones, on which no iron tool had been lifted; probably to guard against any attempt to set forth the likeness of God, and to discountenance the florid and lascivious ornamentations of which the surrounding heathen were so fond.

There they offered burnt-offerings, and sacrificed peace-offerings. The Burnt-offering was what was known as a sweet-savor offering. The whole of the victim was burned. **“It was an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor unto the Lord”** (Leviticus 1).

Herein the Holy Ghost signified, secondarily, our duty to present ourselves without reserve to God; but primarily the devotion of our blessed Lord to accomplish his Father’s will in our redemption. He held nothing back; there was no reserve. He emptied himself, and he did it ungrudgingly; for he said, **“I delight to do thy will, O my God.”**

How sweet this was to the heart of the Father! If on the one hand there was anguish such as only

God could feel, on the other there was the gratification of delighted love.

The Peace-offering also belonged to the sweet-savor offerings, but it was not wholly consumed; a part was eaten by the offerers, to testify that in it they had fellowship and communion with God.

In the sight, therefore, of Israel, Joshua and other chosen representatives partook of portions of the sacrifices, and obeyed the divine injunction, **“Thou shall eat there, and thou shall rejoice before the Lord thy God.”**

If any of the native Hittites, peering out from behind great boulder-stones, were spectators of that scene, they must have been impressed with the thought that The Lord delighted in the happiness of his people, and that his service was as the scent of clover, or as the feast of children at their father’s table. We feed on the peace-offering when we meditate on the love and death of our blessed Lord, and enter into some of the Father’s thoughts of satisfaction at the work he did, and the spirit in which he did it.

As we pass into the Land of Promise we must see to it that we do not leave behind the devout and loving consideration of that precious Blood by which we have been redeemed and which is our life. Our highest and most rapturous experiences can never take the place of this. Constantly we must remind ourselves and others that we are redeemed sinners; and that all our hopes of salvation, our fellowship with God, our motives for service, are derived from what our Saviour did when he bore our sins in his own body on the tree.

Since he died there, we need never stand on the mount of cursing. Because he counted not his life dear to himself, those gaunt and forbidding slopes have become the scene of blessed communion with God. We sit and feast with him, and from peak to peak joy chases the terrors of the curse; and smiles look out on us from the old rocks, whilst the torrents tinged with the light of the sun flash and sing. Because he shed His Blood, there shall, unlike the field of Gilboa, be **“dew, and rain, and fields of offerings,”** even on Ebal; until its terraced slopes resemble those of the opposite mount of blessing.

Ah, blessed Lord, how shall we thank thee, who hast redeemed us from the curse of the law, and made Ebal so choice a trysting-place with God!

II. THE LAW IN CANAAN

Around the altar strong men reared great stones, and plastered them with a facing of cement, composed of lime or gypsum, on which it was easy to write all the words of the law very plainly (Deuteronomy 27:8).

In that dry air, where there is no frost to split and disintegrate, such inscriptions graven on the soft cement, or written on its polished surface when dry with ink or paint, as in the case of the monumental stones of Egypt would remain for centuries.

As the time could not have admitted of the inscription of the whole law, it is probable that the

more salient points were alone committed to the custody of those great cromlechs, to perpetuate to after generations the conditions of the tenure on which Israel held the lease of Palestine. They were a standing protest against the sins which had blighted those fertile valleys, and an incentive to the obedience on which so much of the future hinged.

But when we turn from the literal to the metaphorical, and ask for the underlying typical meaning of this inscription of the law in so prominent a position in the Land of Promise, we are at first startled. What can it mean? Is there a connection after all between law and grace? Are those who sit with Christ in heavenly places still amenable to law “**under the law**,” as the Apostle puts it?

Is it not true that, by our union with Christ who died, we have passed out of the sphere in which we were married to our first husband, the law, and have left it behind us? Are we not, therefore, discharged from the law of our former husband and married to another, even to Him that was raised from the dead?

There is but one answer to all these questions. We have died to the covenant wherein we were holden. We do serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter. We are not looking to our obedience to merit the favor of God, or to win aught of the blessings of the Gospel. But it is also true that faith does not make the law of God of none effect; and still, in the Land of Promise, he undertakes to write it clearly on the tablets of our hearts. In each one of us there is an Ebal with its altar and its stones.

The soul comes back again and again to those first principles of the perfect life; not by compulsion from without, but by the impulse of the Holy Spirit.

The case is this. When we yield ourselves entirely to the Spirit of life which is in Christ Jesus, and which passes freely through us, as the blood through artery and vein, he makes us very sensitive to the least commandment or desire of him whom he has taught us to love; we dread to see the shadow of suffering pass over his face more than to feel the pang of remorse rend our hearts; we find our Heaven in his smile of approval, and the “**Well done!**” that glistens in his eyes when we have done aught to the least of his; we are conscious of the pulse of a love which he has instilled, and which supplies us with the highest code for life and so insensibly whilst we yield ourselves to Him we find ourselves keeping the law after a fashion which was foreign to us when it was a mere outward observance, and we cry with the psalmist, “**Oh, how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.**”

III. THE CONVOCATION

When these rites were fulfilled, the third and concluding scene of this extraordinary transaction took place.

In the center of the valley the ark rested, with its group of attendant priests and Levites. Hard by, Joshua and the leaders of the tribes, elders, officers, and judges.

Then up the slopes of Ebal, finding seats on its terraced sides, were Reuben, Gad and Asher, and

Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali; whilst up the slopes of Gerizim were the larger and more important tribes of Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Joseph, and Benjamin. It was as though the voice of blessing must be louder than that of cursing a prediction of its final prevalence and triumph.

Then Joshua read aloud **“all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them.”**

And as he solemnly read, whether the blessing or the curse, each several item was responded to by the Amens that thundered forth from thousands of throats, and rolled in reverberating echoes through the hills. Earth has seldom heard such shouts as those!

It is well worth our while to ponder the list of blessings appended to obedience in that memorable twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, that we may discover their spiritual counterparts, and, having found them, to claim them.

Let us, first, be quite sure that we are right with God; next, that we are on his plan and doing his will; also thirdly, that we are set upon his glory, altogether irrespective of our own interests; and we shall find ourselves able to appropriate blessings of which we little dreamed. The Lord will open his good treasury in Heaven and make us plenteous for good, and establish us for an holy people unto Himself.

Nor can we better close our meditation than by asking that the Holy Spirit may so indwell and guide us that we may choose what he ordains, and not swerve by a hair's breadth to the right or left of the narrow path of obedience; keeping his commandments; obeying his biddings; perfectly conformed to his will. Thus shall Ebal cease to frown, and Gerizim rain its blessings upon us. Ours shall be the Beatitudes with which our Master opened his great discourse. Ours, the heavenly Kingdom, the divine comfort, the earthly inheritance, the filling and the mercy, the vision of God, and the blessed prerogative of sonship, and finally the great reward (Matthew 5:1-12).

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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